Friar Jerome's

Beautiful Book

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FRIAR JEROME'S BEAUTIFUL BOOK,
BY THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH. WITH
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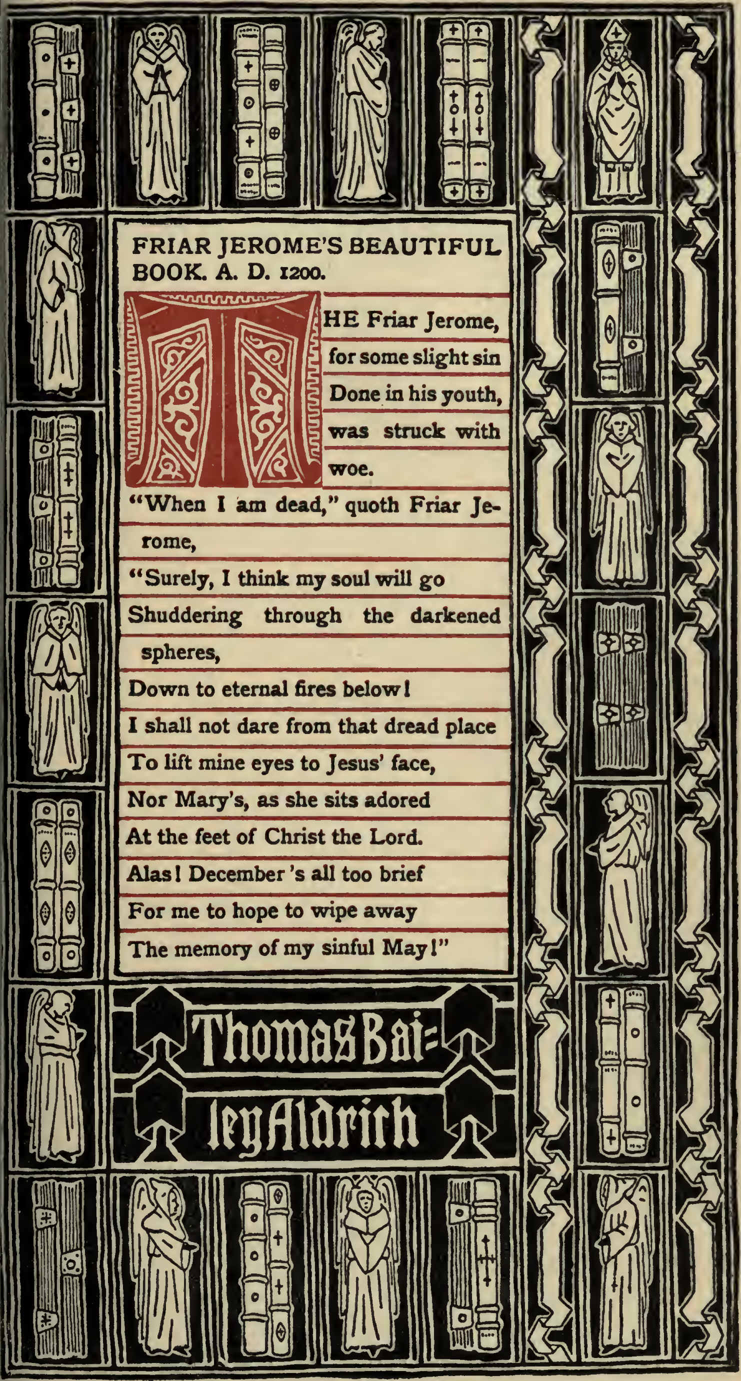
FRIAR JEROME'S BEAUTIFUL BOOK.

Friar Jerome's Beautiful Book



FRIAR JEROME'S BEAUTIFUL BOOK. A. D. 1200.

THE Friar Jerome, for some slight sin
Done in his youth, was struck with woe.
"When I am dead," quoth Friar Jerome,
"Surely, I think my soul will go
Shuddering through the darkened spheres,
Down to eternal fires below!
I shall not dare from that dread place
To lift mine eyes to Jesus' face,
Nor Mary's, as she sits adored
At the feet of Christ the Lord.
Alas! December 's all too brief
For me to hope to wipe away
The memory of my sinful May!"

Thomas Bailey Aldrich

And Friar Jerome was full of grief
That April evening, as he lay
On the straw pallet in his cell.
He scarcely heard the curfew-bell
Calling the brotherhood to prayer;
But he arose, for 't was his care
Nightly to feed the hungry poor
That crowded to the Convent door.

HIS choicest duty it had been:
But this one night it weighed him
"What work for an immortal soul, [down.
To feed and clothe some lazy clown!
Is there no action worth my mood,
No deed of daring, high and pure,
That shall, when I am dead, endure,
A well-spring of perpetual good?"

AND straight he thought of those
great tomes [boast—
With clamps of gold—the Convent's
How they endured, while kings and realms

Past into darkness and were lost;
How they had stood from age to age,
Clad in their yellow vellum-mail,
'Gainst which the Paynim's godless rage,
The Vandal's fire, could naught avail:
Though heathen sword-blows fell like hail,
Though cities ran with Christian blood,
Imperishable they had stood!
They did not seem like books to him,
But Heroes, Martyrs, Saints—themselves
The things they told of, not mere books
Ranged grimly on the oaken shelves.

TO those dim alcoves, far withdrawn,
He turned with measured steps and
Trimming his lantern as he went; [slow,
And there, among the shadows, bent
Above one ponderous folio,
With whose miraculous text were blent
Seraphic faces: Angels, crowned
With rings of melting amethyst;
Mute, patient Martyrs, cruelly bound

To blazing fagots; here and there,
Some bold, serene Evangelist,
Or Mary in her sunny hair;
And here and there from out the words
A brilliant tropic bird took flight;
And through the margins many a vine
Went wandering—roses, red and white,
Tulip, wind-flower, and columbine
Blossomed. To his believing mind
These things were real, and the wind,
Blown through the mullioned window, took
Scent from the lilies in the book.

"SANTA Maria!" cried Friar Jerome,
"Whatever man illumined this,
Though he were steeped heart-deep in sin,
Was worthy of unending bliss,
And no doubt hath it! Ah! dear Lord,
Might I so beautify Thy Word!
What sacristan, the convents through,
Transcribes with such precision? who
Does such initials as I do?

Lo! I will gird me to this work,
And save me, ere the one chance slips.
On smooth, clean parchment I 'll engross
The Prophet's fell Apocalypse;
And as I write from day to day,
Perchance my sins will pass away."

SO Friar Jerome began his Book.
From break of dawn till curfew-chime
He bent above the lengthening page,
Like some rapt poet o'er his rhyme.
He scarcely paused to tell his beads,
Except at night; and then he lay
And tost, unrestful, on the straw,
Impatient for the coming day—
Working like one who feels, perchance,
That, ere the longed-for goal be won,
Ere Beauty bare her perfect breast,
Black Death may pluck him from the sun.
At intervals the busy brook,
Turning the mill-wheel, caught his ear;
And through the grating of the cell

He saw the honeysuckles peer,
And knew 't was summer, that the sheep
In fragrant pastures lay asleep,
And felt that, somehow, God was near.
In his green pulpit on the elm,
The robin, abbot of that wood,
Held forth by times; and Friar Jerome
Listened, and smiled, and understood.

WHILE summer wrapt the blissful land
What joy it was to labor so,
To see the long-tressed Angels grow
Beneath the cunning of his hand,
Vignette and tail-piece subtly wrought!
And little recked he of the poor
That missed him at the Convent door;
Or, thinking of them, put the thought
Aside. "I feed the souls of men
Henceforth, and not their bodies!"—yet
Their sharp, pinched features, now and then,
Stole in between him and his Book,
And filled him with a vague regret.

NOW on that region fell a blight:
The corn grew cankered in its sheath;
And from the verdurous uplands rolled
A sultry vapor fraught with death—
A poisonous mist, that, like a pall,
Hung black and stagnant over all.
Then came the sickness—the malign,
Green-spotted terror called the Pest,
That took the light from loving eyes,
And made the young bride's gentle breast
A fatal pillow. Ah! the woe,
The crime, the madness that befell!
In one short night that vale became
More foul than Dante's inmost hell.
Men curst their wives; and mothers left
Their nursing babes alone to die,
And wantoned, singing, through the streets,
With shameless brow and frenzied eye;
And senseless clowns, not fearing God—
Such power the spotted fever had—
Razed Cragwood Castle on the hill,
Pillaged the wine-bins, and went mad.

And evermore that dreadful pall
Of mist hung stagnant over all:
By day, a sickly light broke through
The heated fog, on town and field;
By night, the moon, in anger, turned
Against the earth its mottled shield.

THEN from the Convent, two and two,
The Prior chanting at their head,
The monks went forth to shrive the sick,
And give the hungry grave its dead—
Only Jerome, he went not forth,
But hiding in his dusty nook,
"Let come what will, I must illume
The last ten pages of my Book!"
He drew his stool before the desk,
And sat him down, distraught and wan,
To paint his daring masterpiece,
The stately figure of Saint John.
He sketched the head with pious care,
Laid in the tint, when, powers of Grace!
He found a grinning Death's-head there,

And not the grand Apostle's face!

THEN up he rose with one long cry:
"'Tis Satan's self does this," cried he,
"Because I shut and barred my heart
When Thou didst loudest call to me!
O Lord, Thou know'st the thoughts of men,
Thou know'st that I did yearn to make
Thy Word more lovely to the eyes
Of sinful souls, for Christ his sake!
Nathless, I leave the task undone:
I give up all to follow Thee—
Even like him who gave his nets
To winds and waves by Galilee!"

WHICH said, he closed the precious Book
In silence, with a reverent hand;
And drawing his cowl about his face
Went forth into the Stricken Land.
And there was joy in heaven that day—
More joy o'er this forlorn old friar

Than over fifty sinless men
Who never struggled with desire!

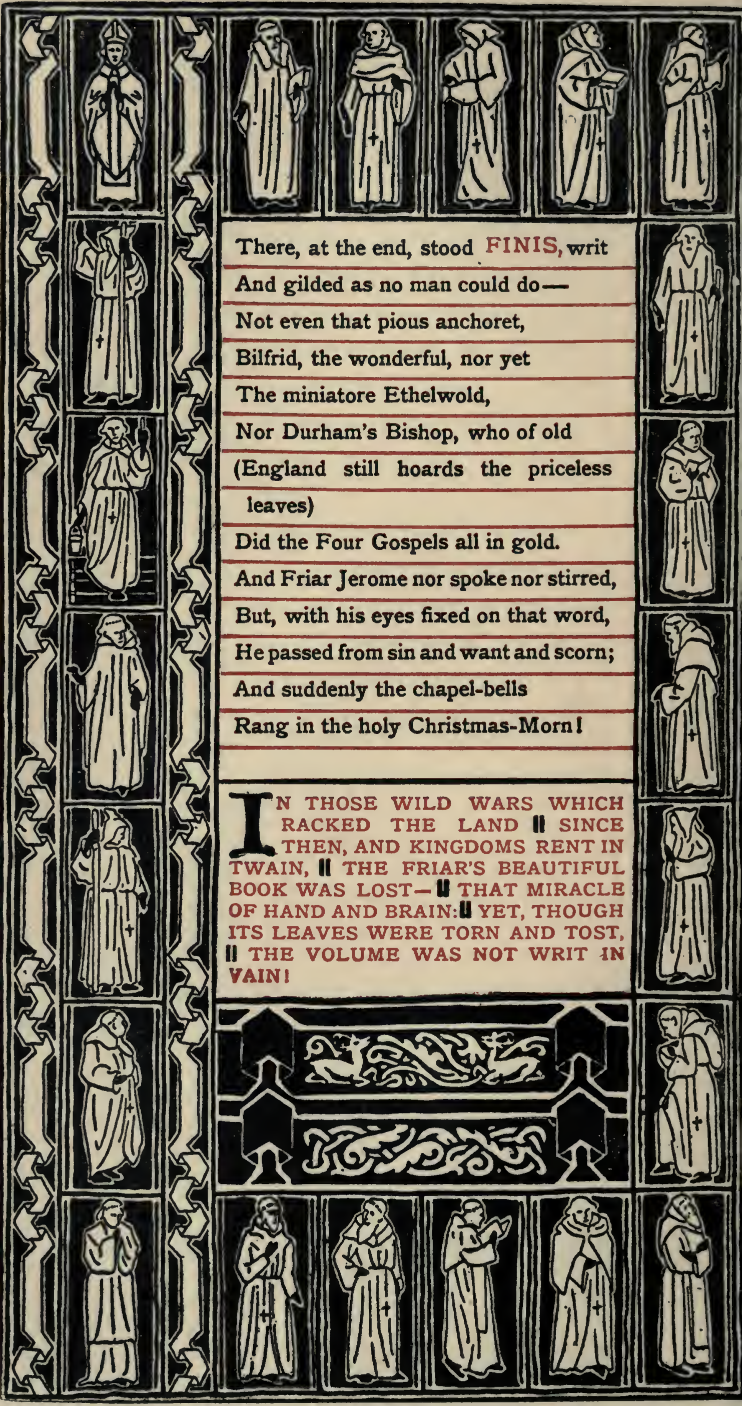
WHAT deeds he did in that dark town,
What hearts he soothed with anguish torn,
What weary ways of woe he trod,
Are written in the Book of God,
And shall be read at Judgment Morn.
The weeks crept on, when, one still day,
God's awful presence filled the sky,
And that black vapor floated by,
And lo! the sickness past away.
With silvery clang, by thorpe and town,
The bells made merry in their spires:
O God! to think the Pest is flown!
Men kissed each other on the street,
And music piped to dancing feet
The livelong night, by roaring fires!

THEN Friar Jerome, a wasted shape—
For he had taken the Plague at last

Rose up, and through the happy town,
And through the wintry woodlands, past
Into the Convent. What a gloom
Sat brooding in each desolate room!
What silence in the corridor!
For of that long, innumerous train
Which issued forth a month before
Scarce twenty had come back again!

COUNTING his rosary step by step,
With a forlorn and vacant air,
Like some unshriven churchyard thing,
The Friar crawled up the mouldy stair
To his damp cell, that he might look
Once more on his belovèd Book.

AND there it lay upon the stand,
Open!—he had not left it so.
He grasped it, with a cry; for, lo!
He saw that some angelic hand,
While he was gone, had finished it!
There 't was complete, as he had planned;



There, at the end, stood FINIS, writ
And gilded as no man could do—
Not even that pious anchoret,
Bilfrid, the wonderful, nor yet
The miniatore Ethelwold,
Nor Durham's Bishop, who of old
(England still hoards the priceless leaves)
Did the Four Gospels all in gold.
And Friar Jerome nor spoke nor stirred,
But, with his eyes fixed on that word,
He passed from sin and want and scorn;
And suddenly the chapel-bells
Rang in the holy Christmas-Morn!

IN THOSE WILD WARS WHICH RACKED THE LAND ‖ SINCE THEN, AND KINGDOMS RENT IN TWAIN, ‖ THE FRIAR'S BEAUTIFUL BOOK WAS LOST— ‖ THAT MIRACLE OF HAND AND BRAIN: ‖ YET, THOUGH ITS LEAVES WERE TORN AND TOST, ‖ THE VOLUME WAS NOT WRIT IN VAIN!

Finis

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